

Reflections from Owego Sherry Miller Hocking

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Reflections from Owego in November. Late fall seems to close the world into itself, forcing people to seek a refuge, a harbor, from the outside. In the fall, birds tend to flock. At the same time, the outer world opens up and the structure reveals itself to you, as the tangled brush and thick green grasses die for winter. Searching for community. Expanding vision.

Some of the media organizations in the State are celebrating anniversaries. One decade. Two decades. In September Visual Studies Workshop hosted a symposium in Rochester, Development of Video in New York State 1969-79, exploring with some of the early practitioners the early history of video in the State. The New York Foundation for the Arts held an Artists Conference in Cortland in October, bringing together practicing artists from the central region of the State for a conversation about their place and role in today's society. Some of these thoughts stem from those encounters...

We have all learned much and grown in twenty years. Political agendas and social, cultural and economic forces have reduced the variety of activity. The gift economy gives way to the marketplace economy. The exchange of commodities becomes the only measure of value and worth. Organizations are told to mature, to expand, to sell product. It becomes more difficult for young people to find entrance. We tend to seek a safety and a sameness in activity and in creations, perhaps as a protection from the larger societal forces which today seem to threaten to overwhelm true creative and educational freedom, exchange and opportunity. The funders can provide money. It is important and it is necessary to artists and to those organizations which support them. But the larger gifts, of ideas, of conversations among colleagues we can only give to ourselves.

Maybe we are also gaining a truer perspective by scaling back to a more human dimension. Maybe we are all also getting a little older. There seems to be a reevaluation with a subsequent acceptance of a smaller, more carefully defined world view. Perhaps video won't inspire the encompassing positive social and communications revolutions many had hopes for. Perhaps video isn't the populist art tool, allowing everyone to be an artist. Perhaps we all can't be the major media center, offering comprehensive programs in all of those many enumerated and outlined areas of activity required of us by the guidelines. Perhaps that is alright. Perhaps even that is healthy. Perhaps we need to turn again to the view that these organizations are for people, for artists ... and we need first of all to clearly understand what it is that an artist needs to make work. Everything else stems from this - all the exhibition, distribution, analysis, teaching, study, criticism, preservation, funding, reporting, marketing, all of it. Maybe we don't really need to be professionals. To be an amateur is to be in love with what you do.

We live in upstate New York. It is private. Quiet. The space is shared with opossums, hummingbirds, fox; by trembling aspen, shagbark hickory. It is also isolated, geographically and some will say culturally, from a larger community of artists. I guess we all, artists or not, seek a

community in which to share, to have conversation, to learn from each other and to exchange... Giancola says that the ecological cost to our environment of extensive, and now expensive, personal travels supported by fossil fuels, may disallow the convergence of isolated communities, the frequent meetings face to face. Can we look forward to new technologies, video, computers and telephone links, as ways to again extend community, without the needs for physical transportation, as ways to share art and to share ideas, to speak together. What is the environmental price for the new technologies? What does it mean that we can speak together without physical presence? How does that alter our conversation.

As they became tools for art-making, the 'new technologies' of video and computers radically altered art – its practice, its marketing, its global impact on popular culture. What do the future technologies hold for artists? Do we have a clear and simple understanding of what has already taken place? Can this conceptual framework become itself a tool to help us to embrace any new “new technologies”, as art-making systems and as communicative devices in the establishment of communities.

The Center offers video and computer technologies to artists to create works. What many of the artists tell us is important to them in their stay at the Center is less often the tools. It has to do with a gift of space and time. Of being able to leave one's own environment, with its normal and frequent impingements on time – the phone rings, you have to go to work, cook dinner, care for your children. Art making comes last. At the Center you have to confront yourself and yourself-making-art. Because your usual life is suspended. You are offered a loft space and the equipment and some help if you need it. Out the window is the Susquehanna River. What you make of all of that is up to you. It is self-definable. The time-scales and frames are your own. There is no deadline, no production schedule. You experiment. You teach yourself. You have time to think. You are in retreat. You create the experience. So maybe even the “new technologies” of the Nineties are still really not at the heart of the matter of making art.

The new technologies also allow us to speak most to those who want most to hear – narrowcasting is perhaps a good idea. Art becomes elitist when people are not permitted access to it. But art is not elitist if only a small number of people desire to access it. Because an artist uses mass communications tools to create art doesn't mean the art is interesting to the masses. Because an artist uses television doesn't mean the work belongs on television. Art for all people/art for the elite is an old conversation... and it got more complex when a medium of transmission (tv) became a medium of creation (tv).

Maybe what we do really isn't popular. Maybe the value in what we do isn't equivalent to its popularity. If art is commodity then art to succeed must be popular. Maybe art isn't really commodity except as it resides in a particular social/cultural context. Maybe not everyone who is exposed to art will learn to like art. And maybe this is all OK. Maybe all artists are really from the provinces.

Glossary

Amateur (L. Amare: to love) An admirer. One who engages in activity as a pastime rather than a profession. Sometimes connotes a lack of competence. Implies a lack of remuneration for the activity.

Isolated (L. Insula: island) To be set apart or solitary; an individual withdrawn from society.

Parochial (L. Parochia: parish) Relating to a parish. Confined or restricted; limited in range or scope.

Professional (L. Protessus: to make a public declaration, as of vows)
Engaged in technical or ethical standards of an activity which is a permanent career and a livelihood. To engage in such activity for financial consideration.

Province (L. Provincia: a region brought under the ancient Roman government) A biogeographical area.

Provincial a person of local or restricted interests. A person lacking in refinements.. Limited in outlook. Narrow. A style marked by simplicity, informality and plainness.

Sophisticated (Gk. Sophos: clever) In reference to Sophists, 5th century BC Greek teachers of rhetoric and philosophy, noted for subtle and allegedly specious reasoning. Not pure or in its original state; adulterated. Deprived of simplicity; highly complicated or worldly-wise.

Urbane (L. Urbs: city) Notably polite or finished in manner. Polished; suave.